

Dance Index



THE RECENT THEATER OF MARTHA GRAHAM

By ROBERT HORAN



Appalachian Spring. Martha Graham, May O'Donnell, Merce Cunningham, Erick Hawkins.

Photograph, Cris Alexander

Dance Index

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Comment

The first issue of *Dance Index* appeared in January, 1942, and one sentence from the editorial comment written then is particularly interesting to reconsider: "A year from now it may be undesirable or impossible even to think of manufacturing anything as apparently useless as a sober review concerned with one rather specific branch of theatre, and that lyric and unrealistic."

Being no more clairvoyant than anyone else, the editors, when they first conceived the idea of *Dance Index*, had not imagined the cataclysmic events which precipitated and followed Pearl Harbor, yet even in their happy innocence there was some cause for genuine doubt as to whether there were enough people in the world sufficiently interested in the non-commercial aspects of dancing to support such a periodical as they planned. Now, after five years of continuous publication, during much of which time all three founders were actively engaged in the war, *Dance Index* begins its sixth year with a comfortable reaffirmation of faith and enthusiasm from many original subscribers, and an encouraging number of new readers. Notwithstanding the current boom in dance literature, there is clearly a discriminating audience for such material as we present, and not alone among students and those professionally interested in some related field.

At no time have we relaxed our standard of presentation. There is still no advertising, the pictorial accompaniment to each study is more than ever a feature involving careful consideration and research, rather than a casual assortment of suitable illustrations arranged merely to avoid the monotony of unbroken text, and the quality of paper and printing has generally withstood the difficulties of war-time production. We are

warmly grateful to our loyal readers for their persistent support and interest despite periodic delays in publication, and the necessary increase in price made in 1945.

Forty-two issues of *Dance Index*, many of them (except in the first year) still available, have been published to date, and the diversity of themes is notably catholic. Future issues planned include "Juba and American Minstrelsy," by Marian Hannah Winter; a translation by Anatol Chujoy of Y. Slonimsky's "Petipa"; Dali's Ballet Designs, by Charles E. Roseman Jr., and Joan Junyer's Dance Architecture by George Amberg; an essay on the Ballet d'Action before Noverre, by the late Artur Michel, and articles on Antony Tudor and Strawinsky. We also look forward to new pieces by our old friends and past contributors, Lillian Moore, Ann Barzel, George Chaffee and Joseph Cornell.

The present article on Martha Graham is the first we have published on any contemporary figure in the American concert dance. Dancer, teacher and choreographer, Miss Graham has created unique theatre tapestries of these three threads, so closely and intricately woven that the strands are inseparable. She is, herself, an essential part of her productions, in much the same way as was Isadora Duncan—the whole drawing its life and form entirely from her perception, if not from her presence. The volume of her work is large and much of it is already documented through reflective literary and pictorial comment. The poet Robert Horan, considers here the compositions since "Letter to the World," which he discusses individually and in relation to the development of Miss Graham's intellectual and emotional approach to theatre dancing.

M.E.

COVER: Martha Graham. Photograph by Cris Alexander.

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A discussion of the recent theater of Martha Graham, that is of works created within the last five years, provides the opportunity for comment upon those mature conflicts and issues of her art which have been in preparation for twenty years. A close examination of them makes evident the whole quality of her contribution to the contemporary dance, and allows us to see the final directions it is taking, without attempting an historical summary which, because of its scope, would be largely a calendar of names and dates. The earlier works have been, by now, quite fully chronicled, whereas the development of Graham's art into a split between the more literary or narrative and the abstract has been less so.

This distinction, between the narrative and the abstract, is the simplest possible one to be made between *Letter to the World* and *Dark Meadow*, for instance, although it refuses to cover the entire case. It does not suffice, of course, for the obvious reason that none of these works is interested in establishing purity or is seeking to set any precedent. Graham, like other figures of her stature, is not much concerned with the theoretical scaffolding from which works of art are presumed to hang by their teeth. To quote directly:

I am interested only in the subtle being, the subtle body that lies beneath the gross muscles. Every dance is, to some greater or lesser extent, a kind of fever chart, a graph of the heart. I do not compose ideologically and I have never considered my dances in any way intellectual. Whatever theory may be read into them proceeds from the material and not vice-versa.

This is a plain, honest statement, and of special importance because there is a ten-

dency, both among dancers and the general audience, to think of Graham, indeed, of all 'modern' dancers, as primarily exponents of a movement, with a primer of aims and ambitions, undeviating sets of principles and prejudices, and on the whole a rather intellectual approach to their art.

The fluctuation, then, between the narrative and the abstract in Graham's dances is without particular calculation, except in a work like *Letter to the World* which is openly committed to literary reference. The specific content of her most recent works is rarely set in motion by narrative, representational elements (again we have an exception, *Punch and the Judy*, which is intended as a satire), but she does, on occasion, borrow from a loose literary structure which seems a gesture of dubious value at best. Because, within this framework of identified figures or 'characters' (such as *One like Jason* in *Serpent Heart*) the real invention rises out of a purer and more immediate emotion than any supplied by text or program. So that, at these moments, one can have the feeling that Graham is straining to keep within the limits of an arbitrary subject, or is trying to give her title some definition.

A chronological examination of her recent works should make this more clear, illustrating at the same time the diversity as well as the repetition of her work, and that abundant, provocative imagination which makes her such a unique figure in the contemporary theater. Any attempt to suggest the power and poetry of her personal performance must remain merely a claim to be substantiated within the theater. The photographs reveal these qualities, even if fractionally, still better than verbal description.

PUNCH AND THE JUDY

Punch and the Judy is, at the same time, the earliest and the least interesting of the works considered here. It is a satire without irony, that is to say it remains a kind of farce, ribald and broad, without being really witty, as *Every Soul is a Circus* is, and yet holding its head somewhat above the level of burlesque. Its noisy commentary upon rotary clubs, interpreted American history, domestic day-dreams and quarrels, necessitates a narrative pattern filled with pantomimic gesture, and so it falls cleanly into the arena of pure theater. It is possible that since its first performances, some of the excessive vigor it now displays is the result of playing up comedy situations until the balance and proportion of the dance are endangered. It is a work performed with verve, and in Miss Graham's case with subtlety, but without that caution and respect that her more serious works receive. Her company seems to feel increasingly at liberty to distort the original pattern, to the end that the work has become cluttered with innuendo and downstage grimacing. It shows, however, the great variety of accent of which Graham is capable. If its original intention was to be

a more serious and pointed work, we can only regret the circumstance that deflected it. The bouncing and sometimes vulgar score by Robert McBride would be difficult to have set differently, but that should have been a matter of foresight rather than regret.

Graham has an extraordinary capacity for serious comedy, a shrewd and delicate irony, which could amuse and touch us at the same time. If she could find a subject of this sort with less narrative detail, crisper and more calculated than *Punch and the Judy*, she could undoubtedly make from it a work with the same choreographic sophistication, and play it with the same energy which she now reserves for more taxing works. *Punch and the Judy* has been, of course, a ballet of considerable popularity, particularly on 'the road.' Its theatricality admits a more elaborate staging and a more individual treatment of her company, and it allows an audience, built up to a considerable tension in other works, to relax, laugh and free the attention. The other most marked occasion when Graham concedes her entire company this choreographic individuality is *Deaths and Entrances*.



Punch and the Judy.

Eric Schaal

DEATHS AND ENTRANCES

Deaths and Entrances stands in a critical relation to Graham's earlier 'theater pieces' like *Letter to the World* and *Every Soul is a Circus* and the later abstract theater of *Dark Meadow* and *Serpent Heart*. It still depends upon a defined physical setting, the gloomy cavernous house in which the three sisters enact their blind battle; it still partakes of a vague literary atmosphere, and uses stage properties which are too realistic to escape symbolic reference, such as the goblet and the shell and the chess figures; its use of pre-Victorian costumes and the thin funereal veils all suggest the period and poetry of *Letter to the World*. And yet it is hanging on here only with one hand. Its most powerful and communicative moments are long stretches of irrational and abstract movement, very loosely associated with any theatrical drama we already know. Whereas in *Letter to the World*, the actual identification of the dancer with Emily Dickinson informs the dance with a special pathos and precision (for instance, The Little Tippler with its drunken, coy humor; the tender and lonely Blue Seas section; the scenes with the Ancestress and March, and the New England funeral), in *Deaths and Entrances*, it is exactly at those moments when the dance escapes into an upper air outside of its own pretensions and becomes a submerged but general drama, with its strange urgency and bewildered grief, that it is most touching. In *Letter to the World*, then, Graham created a ballet-theater with a libretto and characters and cumulative plot, although there is no exterior 'action' as such; and this is done

with such unity and definition that it makes *Letter to the World* a masterpiece of its kind. In *Deaths and Entrances* we are simply following an emotion, deprived and turned in upon itself, that issues in madness. Perhaps it was this final 'mad scene' that led Edwin Denby to remark in his review of the dance that 'no more sincere actress than Miss Graham exists in the American theater.' It was possible and justifiable to think of her performance in this double light of dance-acting. (This scene is incidentally of a peculiar, frightening power. I have noticed audiences shrinking back into their seats as it builds up its imagery of derangement.)

The elements in *Deaths and Entrances* that imply a shift into a purer medium occur frequently: the looped, bird-like solo of Graham's in the latter half of the piece; the dance for four men, with its aerial counterpoint and even a suggestion of individual conflict, which was, up to this point, the finest choreography for men that she had done. The ambiguity of meaning in a dance like *Deaths and Entrances* arises partially from Graham's use of stage properties, like the goblet and chess-pieces, which she clearly intends as spontaneous associations to further and enrich the action, like childhood's uncalculated memories, but which the audience worries into the foreground, trying to read into them some larger significance, usually of a Freudian nature. Graham would certainly prefer her audience to look at them in their particular use, and not damage the continuity of the dance by trying to divine them as obscure and calculated symbols. But to an audience already uneasy about meaning, this is a difficult discipline.

Death and Entrances has a very beautiful scheme of climactic movement, for which Hunter Johnson's score is theatrical if not musically very inventive. The movement builds, with less interruption than *Letter to the World*, to its peak, using thematic phrases



Deaths and Entrances.



Photographs, Cris Alexander

to unify separate sections. One is never aware, for instance, of its extreme length as a ballet. The possessed performance that Graham gives of it, superbly controlled in technique (and it could have become a *tour de force*), makes it perpetually engrossing to watch. Its few weaknesses occur only upon reflection, and they are not of such a nature that on re-seeing it we do not feel bound up again in its brilliance and its desperation.

Salem Shore seems somewhat thin and false in its emotion, not as Graham dances it, but in its conception. Its tenuous, romantic subject has a blurred, hurried look, and the clear and sometimes radiant performance which it receives does not obscure its fundamental ineffectiveness. The plucking motions at the skirt as she dances in and out of the circled vine at the beginning are very strong, and the ballad-like section, with its

SALEM SHORE



Salem Shore

Cris Alexander

pathetic exuberance, is touching. These isolated moments make apparent what the dance might have been, but its essence is diluted and repeats technical facilities of the choreographer where inspiration has faltered. It indicates, however, a certain wilful tenderness (which has also shown itself in *Letter to the World*), still far from defined, but a valuable addition to Graham's vocabulary, and deserving amplification in a stronger work.

The occasional use of spoken lines, like an extra instrument in the orchestra, is here very loose and distracting. They do not serve as a bridge between the dance and the audience in any continuous way, nor even as an ornament to the action, but are halting and apologetic. They do make clear the subject

of the dance, but surely that should be the business of the dancer. The score by Paul Nordoff is one of the saddest with which Graham has yet been burdened. Its poverty of suggestion only underlines the smallness of feeling on the stage.

APPALACHIAN SPRING

Appalachian Spring is, perhaps, the most successful of Graham's lighter or tenderer dances. Not that it is less serious than other works, but what it reveals is simpler and more open, and has a different emotional bias than the works surrounding it.

The group of young girls in their nervous spirited cavorting remind one of children who, on a nod from their mother, are allowed to play a few more minutes before prayers. The variations on square-dance figures which they do, and the counterpoint they make in games around the preacher, have both charm and excitement.

Everyone has always seemed to dance *Appalachian Spring* with unusual love and precision, as if it were a ballet they knew everything about, and had very carefully rehearsed. The entire company is at ease and at home, unselfconsciously American. Aaron Copland's score for this work is certainly one of the finest Graham has ever worked with. Its lyrical grace and rhythmic variety in the use of folk material pay the dance the compliment of independent imagination. The movement, it is true, is in a lower key and its invention less constant than in other works of this period, but this is a shortcoming only relative.

Appalachian Spring provides that variety to a program for which Graham seems often to have been searching, but without implying a dance of a wholly different caliber, as *Punch and the Judy* does, for example. The audience feels that it is still within the same



Appalachian Spring

Photographs, Arnold Eagle

theater, but looking at another landscape, this one more relaxed and blown over by those free winds and waters which the title suggests. It is particular, local and subtle, just as *American Document* was general, pretentious and vulgar (although it developed, incidentally, some marvellous group choreography, and contains some of Graham's finest solos from this period.)

Graham has a remarkable talent for invoking her heritage and environment almost as an unconscious gesture, except in those lapses of planned and patriotic effort of which her old and discarded solo *Columbiad* was a disarming example. The fact that she disdains the use of exotic materials in her dances may have gained impetus from that period in which she worked with Shawn and St. Denis in an emotional tour of the Orient. *Deep Song*, for example, a solo done during the critical period of the Spanish war, reflects that country and people in its patterns, cadences, beating heels and arched back, but very indirectly, without ever at-

tempting to imitate or reproduce Spanish movement.

What Graham has developed are more distant and deeper influences, archaic or primitive movements, some of them still surviving in the Mexico and Southwest which she has visited, and all manner of ritual styles, which she feels fundamental to our dance history. These ritual patterns actually provide an aspect of formalism in her dances, in somewhat the same way that the physical etiquette of court ceremony has influenced the ballet in its severe, upright elegance. Like the Greek dramatic structures, the Catholic mass, the rain-prayers and witchcraft exorcisations, they are a continuous, formal history. Her use of them can be conscious and explicit, as in *Primitive Mysteries* and other dances of that period (perhaps it is the moment to reaffirm that *Primitive Mysteries* is a classic of this or any dance history), or it can be a structure well beneath the surface as in *Dark Meadow*, or the archaic, oblique postures of *Herodiade*.

HERODIADE

Noguchi's set for *Herodiade*.

Arnold Eagle



Herodiade is a solo of astonishing power. This is said knowing, of course, that technically it is a duet, and not to minimize the quality or necessity of Miss O'Donnell's performance. But it is a solo in the sense in which the whole substance and conflict of the dance is focussed upon *Herodiade*, and is worked out by her without any reference to the figure of the attendant, except as an habitual presence, a secular figure like the Greek chorus which points up the tragedy. The nurse is almost the spectator transferred to the stage, (the conscience of the audience made active), handing *Herodiade* her brush or mantle or mirror, stepping back

to comment or to warn, but unable to interrupt what is already inevitable in the opening measures.

This destiny that Graham has grappled with in several pieces is not to be interpreted as any simple variety of predestination in the ancient sense of Fate. It is more nearly the result of fixated and fired emotion which, when it has torn down all of its restraint and refused any offer of love or reconciliation, will rush headlong into self-destruction. It is possible to adduce this emotion from fear, as in *Deaths and Entrances*, or from inexorable pride and desire, as in *Serpent Heart*, a longing for freedom through the agency of destruction. Or it can be interpreted in the same way as the issue of that extreme zeal that wrapped Joan of Arc in a numbing cloak when she stepped into the flames, or which drove Emily Dickinson, in her virginal dress, deeper and deeper into her own house. A line from Dickinson which is used in *Letter to the World*, 'there is a pain so utter it swallows being up,' expresses it very succinctly.

In *Herodiade*, and in the 'mad scene' at the end of *Deaths and Entrances*, Graham may be using this extremity of emotion almost to frighten her audience into some awareness of its danger and its power. She is not using it decoratively, with pathos and crooked grace, as it is used in *Giselle*, certainly; she is not using it eccentrically, or to delineate specific character. Its use is no more strained or symbolic than Kafka's cockroach in the *Metamorphoses* or the machine in *The Penal Colony*; a kind of privately deranged world in which some fragment of emotion has been allowed to become magnified until it crowds out every alternative.

Like a portrait of genius, these dances are intended to show us our own humanity illuminated in their intenser glass. Graham is not here concerned with morbidity or joy or heroism, but with 'the graph of the heart.' It has led her into constructing the visual com-



Herodiade.

Cris Alexander

plement of some fevers that have rarely been described outside of poetry, and she has done this, in a dance like *Herodiade*, with a unity of purpose, a beauty of design, and a compelling execution unique in our theater.

The cautious, romantic score Hindemith devised for *Herodiade* does not seem to me, for all its independent distinction, very provocative for a dance; much less so, for instance, than the theme and variations of his *Four Temperaments*, on which Balanchine has recently made a ballet. The decor for *Herodiade* is discussed in a later section.

DARK MEADOW

Dark Meadow is perhaps the clearest and most unified dance that Graham has done in the last few years. Stark Young has described it as fascinating in its creation of a genuinely abstract theater. It is also an intensely poetic insight into the motive and history of gesture, almost a research on emotion. Its faults are due to undue haste and to a wooden, bloodless score that has about as much relation to Graham's intention as would *Gaité Parisienne*. The long string quartet in the middle, which supports some superb choreography, is pedantically dissonant, with less rhythmic distinction than a vacuum cleaner. The opening 'primitif' section and a few measures for winds supply the only musical relief. It is a surprise and a disappointment that someone who has written a score like *Antigone* should have chosen this occasion to clean house musically. Another fault is in the costumes which narrowly miss articulating the movement because of a certain fussiness of design and sloppy execution. The set is superb. Its curious blend of naïveté and sophistication is exactly suited to the nature of the work. Its small scale monuments and fetiches establish remoteness more accurately than any period design. At his best, and this is it, Noguchi is one of the most poetic designers in America. Graham should not use such rare effects as his to the point of monotony because, like masks or archaic gestures, they lose some power in indiscriminate repetition.

Seeing *Dark Meadow* recaptures that remarkable fantasy that the theater holds for a child. Its enigmatic imagery, its unreal comment on our own reality, have the quality of a violent fairy-tale. It suggests with amazing intuition a sense of history that



swims slightly out of sight in us; a dim, primitive memory like that of a child trapped in a wilderness. That is why its frank sexuality seems so powerful and inoffensive. It is never tricky nor suggestive, but as honest as an animal surprised by a camera.

Graham's own solos are uneven, wavering slightly between earlier styles and genuine discovery, and not quite accurate in their rhythmic emphasis. The Sarabande for three couples is certainly one of the most brilliant pieces of group choreography in her repertoire. With its lifts like crucifixions, and its slow distortions as of figures moving through water, it reveals a variety of reverence among these couples for physicality; that

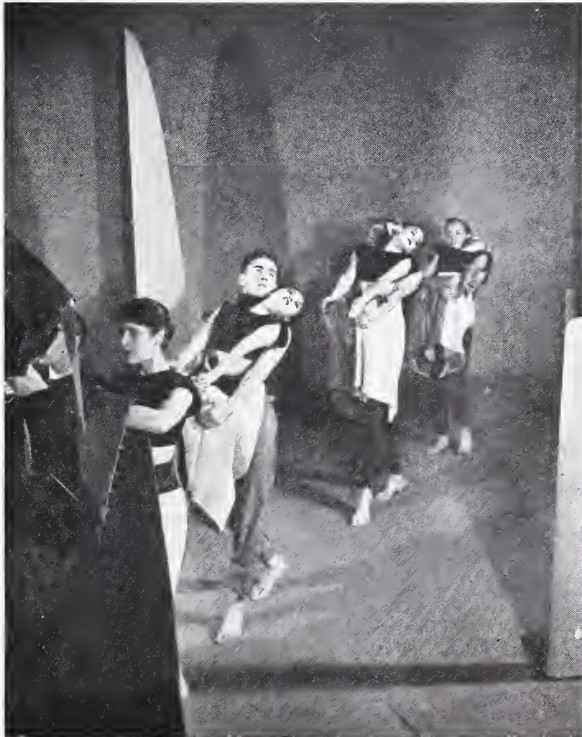
Spring-like adoration of animals and lovers among their fires, branched, tender and passionate, a force trembling and tired with desire, then quieted in suspense, as with an arched and hung wave before it breaks. It shows such a faultless and sensitive invention that it makes one regret the dry, busy stretches in some earlier works where the group seems introduced more out of charity than conviction. Graham has not always handled large group movements on the stage with the same ease as individual movement, and *Dark Meadow* is a fine exception to this insecurity.

There are direct and indirect images in *Dark Meadow* that suggest archaic memory.

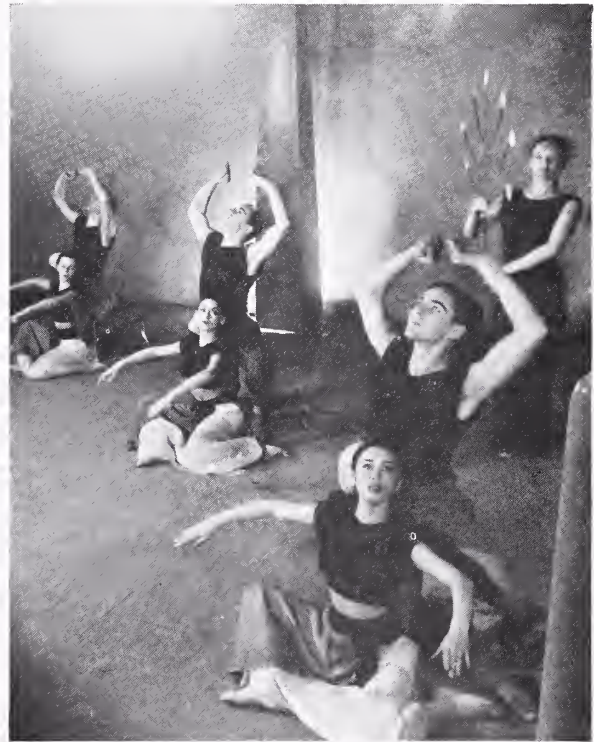
The brief moment where Graham bends forward from the waist touching her hands to the floor and runs rapidly forward, a scuttling, prehensile animal, then as suddenly erect; a compulsive effortless movement that flowers out of the preceding phrase and submerges into the oncoming one like an unexpected light. It might easily be missed so little is it stressed, and yet it becomes almost a key to this section.

Graham's whole company, entrusted with greater responsibility in this work, perform it with a physical devotion and intensity that is very moving, in much the same spirit that some of them have danced *Primitive Mysteries*, an instinctive tribute to its quality.

Dark Meadow.



Three photographs, Arnold Eagle



SERPENT HEART

Serpent Heart, the most recently performed of Graham's dances, also develops a ritualistic pattern, at least internally. Its movement, like that of *Herodiade*, is at times very archaic, which suits its Medean subject. And its vindictive passion is very formally built, interrupted, as were the Greek dramas, by stanzas of choral comment, poetic odes which halted and explicated the meaning. As first given it was somewhat the victim of circumstances: an overcrowded, airless lecture hall instead of a theater, and a work rushed headlong into production a little too early. Both its title and many of its parts are now in revision, and if this adds clarity to its other virtues it should be one of Graham's finest works. Her own solos in the piece are very beautiful as they stand, although their theatrical focus seems a little awry. They are still experimental toward their audience, and give the impression of being more internally felt than they are projected.

The manipulation of four dancers commenting upon, or rather using as a foundation, the Medea legend, is a complicated undertaking. It is attempting to give great dimension in a work of almost chamber size. Perhaps if the issue is settled as to whether it is to be a legendary re-enactment of the Medea in contemporary dance terms, or a dance with slender threads that reach *as far back as* the Medea, the initial confusions will be overcome. As it stands, one remembers everything in it as separately forceful and striking, but discontinuous. One is not engaged in the flow of the work from beginning to end, but intermittently, as if one had closed one's eyes for a moment between each section and opened them somewhere further along, having missed an essential

link. The relation between *One like Jason* and *One like Medea* was perhaps most seriously at fault, having begun at some undetermined point, as if the stream were without source and one started by throwing oneself in the middle. The role taken by Erick Hawkins suffered more fatally from this, in that he became, at the very outset, a foil for an emotional crisis already developed in the Medean figure, and could only aggravate her further into her crime.

The choral interludes have the compact poetry of odes, and May O'Donnell has managed to impart to them a lyrical, cunning strength that is appropriate and moving.

Graham develops, in her own role, disturbing, frightened flashes of unpredictable movement, a kind of crippled, hunted lurching of the body from one stage area to another; relentlessness, pride, avidity, arrogance, solitude. Her long solo with the snake-like strip of cloth is almost a variety of sympathetic magic, a self-intoxication giving impetus and courage toward the enactment of her crime. The tiny, fluttering beat of the body that begins it, and the incantations that ornament it, are extraordinary. The coppery cage which Graham pulls over herself at the end appears to emphasize an insect-like inhumanity, the mythological transformation of a woman, who, by her crimes, has turned herself away from humanity, and stands frozen, immobile, a huge bronze structure like a grasshopper in a desert. Very provocative too is the handling of the burial cloth in which she drags in the princess behind her heels, finally enmeshing the figure of Jason in its folds.

One is conscious in this work, as in others of Graham's, of a static quality that occurs when she or another member of her company retires into inactivity in some nook of the stage, waiting to be spun back into the dance at a further point. They do not exist and enter onto the scene plainly enough, but

often keep themselves in blank evidence, like silent figures in a play waiting for their cues. This damages the freshness of the image when they rejoin the action.

The use of various stage levels, accomplished on Noguchi's strange volcanic decor, was extremely interesting, and if all of these disparate elements are unified and given theatrical shape, the full, inhibited power of the dance should be released, in all of its now implied formal beauty.

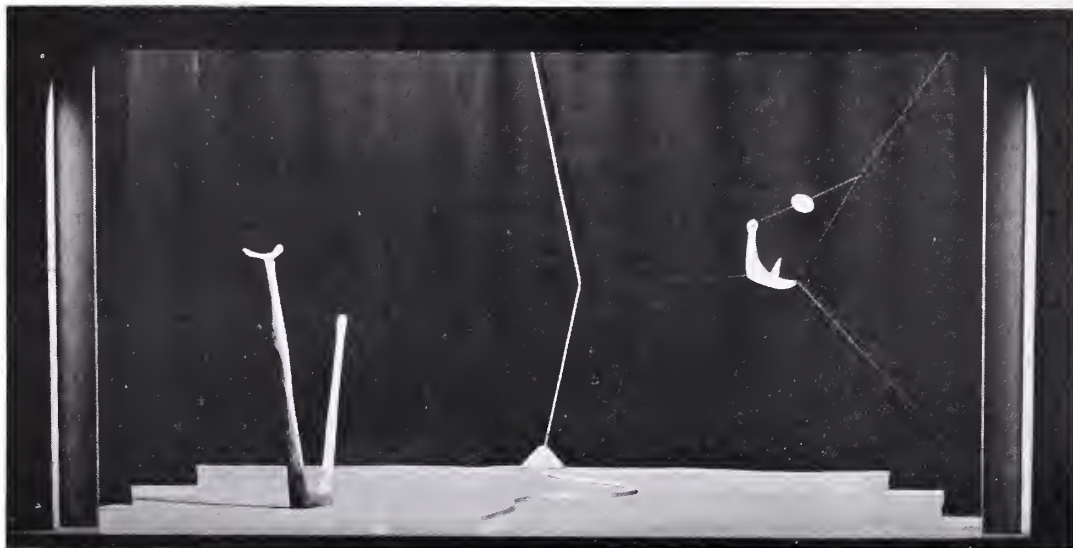
Samuel Barber's score is brilliant, bitter, and full of amazing energy. The alternation of parts, like the swing of a pendulum, between relaxed lyrical flow and tense angularity make a wonderful scaffolding for the tragedy. Its very real beauties were muffled (and this is true of much of the more complex music for Graham's dances), by an initial performance that lacked accuracy and spirit on the part of the orchestra.

THE STAGE OF ISAMU NOGUCHI

The quality of Noguchi's imagination, his great skill and tenderness in constructing stage images, are very sympathetic to Graham's intention. All of her most recent works have had his artistic collaboration. Certainly she is in a difficult position in relation to the choice of stage decor. We do not conceive of her dances in front of a drop by Chagall any more than we can imagine her dancers costumed by Berman's tireless Renaissance hand. This leaves her, often, with something less than a theater stage—a kind of studio improvisation, open, but intricate to look at, as in *Serpent Heart*, where the low-lying objects on the stage seem as much to be personal hazards to the dancer as they are formal decoration to the spectator.

Graham does not dance within a set but on a stage which she can use, that has some nearer function than that of the eye. She prefers to climb over set pieces, move, carry, refocus the objects of her stage as an animal moves in his scenery, a kind of traffic with nature in which everything is, at some point, alive and capable of change. To this extent, then, stage paintings do not serve her purpose. Her stage and her costumes require, however, more mobility than they have yet had, more color and range of detail, or some sharper relation between subject and ornament. If there were more designers trained to adopt stage space as something living and flexible, rather than as a vacuum enlivened by a particularly large painting in front of which small people in fur or feathers parade their implausible humanity, then dancers like Graham would have a wider and more various choice.

The Noguchi designs for *Appalachian Spring*, which is spare and formal without being empty, and *Dark Meadow*, which is more complex in its symbolism, more sophisticated in form and use, are those I like best. *Deaths and Entrances*, designed by Arch Lauterer, still seems inadequately staged, dull, stiff and grey, without that accent on texture and shape which might help to direct its meaning. *Herodiade*, again of Noguchi, is somewhat of a museum-piece. One would like to walk around the skeletal mirror as one would a piece of sculpture; as a stage construction it is too intimate and nervous. The audience must look from it to the dancer, and the simultaneity of the image is destroyed. The chair in this piece, however, is lovely furniture, and reveals that painstaking craftsmanship which makes the seeds of the apple in *Penitente* as delicate and precise as the house in *Appalachian Spring*. Graham is fortunate to have found, in Noguchi, so sympathetic a collaborator, whose insight and imagination have added immeasurably to the beauty of her theater.



Model of Noguchi's set for *Errand Into The Maze*.

Rudolph Burkhardt

It is difficult to separate the quality of Graham's choreography from her personal performance for several reasons. Partially, because the burden of almost every work, particularly those most recent, falls upon her. She has constructed for herself the most luminous moments of its being, those epiphanies and periods of knotty intensity where the whole work can reveal itself as in a flash of light. She is the continual protagonist, the center of conflict; in its simplest theatrical sense, the heroine of her ballets. This is rendered more acute by the fact that there is really no hero. There is a parade of figures that interrupt or influence her destiny, to a greater or lesser degree; there are combatants and lovers, and until recently these are almost identical in Graham's work; there are phantoms or conspirators. But there is never a figure outlined with the same *human scale*, and portraying anything like the complex range of psychological motive which she reserves for herself. This is not entirely

surprising from so superb a dancer as Graham, and in this connection, we can afford to overlook her own sincere contention that she is a dancer primarily and not a choreographer, or that she thinks of herself as a dancer who has had to arrange her dances 'because there was nobody else around who could do them.' The whole point, of course, is that there was nobody else around who *could* do them, or anything like them, and there the problem of creativity and invention determined her choice.

However, the burden of her programs for herself as a dancer is enormous; much too great for the good of her own performance. If she trusted her company to a greater participation in them, it would relax the fantastic demands that continuous dancing puts upon her, and might influence her choreography for her company in a more objective and rewarding direction. This has already happened to some extent. It would be interesting further to see Graham create works

for her company alone, in which her whole effort was concentrated on making a ballet as expressive without her as it would be with her. Perhaps, then, her sophistication in pure movement, dissociated from her own physical manner of performance, would be thrown into relief. Works of this kind, moreover, would be much simpler to hand down to another generation of dancers than many of those which are so dependent upon her unique physical capacities as a dancer.

'Technique only services the body toward complete expressiveness.'

It is not the business of an audience to be sophisticated in the matter of technique, but in the matter of meaning. One of the destructive emphases which ballet discipline has unwittingly encouraged in its audience is the recognition and worship of technique as such. Technique is professional; it is the artist's, and at most, the critic's concern. Knowledge about the intricacies of technical performance is a pathetic substitute for understanding of an art, as any studio full of dancers or musicians can well demonstrate. Graham depends less upon this professional insight from her audiences, and this throws them into some confusion. Too many among them have been accustomed to narrowing their eyes for the sign of too much preparation for a pirouette, possibly because there is so little beyond that to look for. We are burdened everywhere with a conception of technique that muffles instead of clarifying the humanity and force of performance. Dancers work, and know it as their constant necessity, to perfect an instrument so that it may be free of restriction and capable of the widest and truest inflection in motion; free from dishonesty and uncertainty; alive, spontaneous and exact.

But the dry dazzle, the fitful and deathly quality that victimizes much of the dancing in our time, is the inevitable result of this technical parade and competition between dancers, and between dancers and their audience. This can only be achieved, of course, where a standardized vocabulary, an endlessly repeated repertory, make recognition and comparison a dilettante's pleasure. This state is often referred to as Classicism. Many performances of 'classic' ballet that we see today cannot, with the utmost charity, be called anything more than a perpetuation of historical mistakes. They lack that stylized and formal accent, an action that takes place in bright, thin air, tight and full of grace, as dependent upon myth and tradition as a totem-pole or a minuet. As it stands, they often succumb to the imitation of old photographs, or become vehicles for glassy competition in the realm of cold technique.

It is not pertinent that Sylphides or Giselle should look contemporary to their audience (this does not apply, of course, to decor and costume). They should, on the contrary, look old, as old as they are, the way Botticelli, Renaissance furniture or Bellini arias look or sound old; the way even *Primitive Mysteries* looks old next to *Dark Meadow*.



Drawing by Charlotte Trowbridge

That is the way it should be, and it does not lessen their effect, or turn them into works of period peculiarity, to emphasize this quality. Rather it emphasizes their intimacy with time, a close, valid, temporal relation. Their genuine modernity is in question just as much at the moment of composition as at any time thereafter.

Of course, every performance is contemporaneous, and suffers or gains from the burden of our position in time, the patina of interpretation, whether toward clarity or indistinction, that time has set upon it. A constant revision of standard works is being made, in an attempt to lessen the distance between their time and our own, and is self-defeating. Whatever permanence or value they have as works of art is inviolable when they are given as they were made, with a precise, unapologetic honesty, and some conviction of that value. The physical restaging of works in each generation must take this into account. It is sufficient flattery to assume we know how to execute an intention without presuming we can improve upon it. *Primitive Mysteries* and *Frontier* are landmarks in a particular dance expression, and they gain greatly, when they are re-staged, from having been unmolested by revision.

Like all great dancers, Graham is not in competition with anyone but herself. As with Markova or Argentina or Nijinsky, one would not say that she danced better than someone else, but better than she herself did last week, or not so well as last season. These dancers became standards for judgment because they set them and were alone capable of maintaining them with any consistency.

There are qualities in her style of movement that belong to no one else, and are the unmistakeable seal of her personality. Her

body, moving on the stage, is built like a series of diamonds joined at their points, with the whole tension that releases movement knotted at the center, at the pelvis and at the base of the spine. This source of energy that radiates outward, which we notice also in primitive dancers, the Oriental and the Spanish to a much greater degree than the Occidental, destroys terminal grace that flowers at the wrist and the ankle and in the tilt of the head, and replaces this loose ornamentation with gesture more deeply controlled and personally expressive. When the hand is not taut and assuming a definite pattern, it is relaxed from the shoulder blades without being limp, the fingers extended without tension, very seldom curved sharply inward like petals. The extension of the middle finger lengthens the hand as it moves through space, and does not swing the movement back in upon itself. The head rises out of the stem of the neck completely vertical when at rest. The remarkable articulation of the face is not merely a happy accident of nature, but comes from a fluidity of expression that is so constant and evanescent that it has the anonymity of a mask. This is quite another thing from the frozen expression of beatitude, or the drained mask of effort that is non-expression. The very elongated torso, thinned at the waist and flat in the chest (Edwin Denby has pointed out, in his commentary on photographs of Nijinsky,* the similarity between his (Nijinsky's) and Graham's posture, in this respect), services the body toward greater speed, and knits together its parts so that it is not jointed, but moves in a wave through the body like the successive rippled movement of an animal. This simultaneity can be broken up by the particular angularity of movement that Graham uses, which is phrased and accented so differently from traditional balletic movement that it comprises almost a new vo-

* *Dance Index*—Vol. II, No. 3.

cabulary. But her fundamental training of the body is not romantic, and tries to avoid the distortion and personal expression of her own choreography.

There are really three problems in teaching technique in her own studio. The first must deal with that host of non-dancers whose needs are for a more controlled or a more liberated expression; a sense of the body in any kind of motion; posture, speed, grace, flexibility and honesty. The second must adapt itself to the needs of dancers, any dancers that is, as a basic training in the sources of dance movement. The third element of technique is directed toward the particular needs of her company, to serve as a technical basis for some of the problems that arise in her choreography and in their own work. This is an enormous teaching problem, especially when circumstances demand that these separate approaches be combined in mixed classes.

Graham's teaching can be invaluable as a technique for controlled and various expression. The fact that some dancers trained in her school have used it otherwise is unfortunate; their assumption that they must each choreograph for themselves; their constant repetition of technical and expressive devices which properly belong to Graham, suggest that there is yet no standard vocabulary or compositional approach for the contemporary dance, as there is for ballet or for music. If this is desirable, it seems to me it can only be built out of the same generations of accumulated effort which it has taken to establish these arts in their own traditions. One of the reasons this is not happening, is because the 'modern' dance cannot yet, at this point in its history, attract and hold enough dancers of the same proficiency as can the ballet, for reasons of its inferior finances, reputation and glamor. It is only now, after generations of continuous effort, that the ballet has internationalized itself sufficiently to be able to make any kind



Drawing by Charlotte Trowbridge

of a company with purely local dancers. The modern dance has developed most particularly in this country. Outside of Mary Wigman (could one include the modernized ballet style of Kreutzberg?) there have been no major figures in European dancing of this kind. Perhaps Graham has greater sympathy and relation to the style of Antony Tudor, than to many other, more 'modern' dancers. (Her own technique consciously makes use of a great deal of fundamental ballet training.) But wherever young dancers in this art appear, they deserve, beyond the most professional and perceptive criticism, some further encouragement, rather than the nervous and jealous refusal that is often the reaction of those interested groups anxious to prove that this aspect of dancing is unlikely to outlive its first generation.

Graham has attempted, even if unconsciously, to break down the traditional limit of stage-space in dancing. Western dancing in the last few centuries has made a vertical coffin of the stage, which is relieved only when elevation or lifts establish a dramatic stratosphere. The floor area is used in ballet when someone drops dead from a love potion, or kneels under the weight of a ballerina. Historically, there is ample explanation for

avoiding the floor as an expressive area in dancing. To begin with, the dance was social, upright, continuous with life as it was lived in seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe. The floors were not separate, enclosed stages, but often parquets of inlaid wood, intimately surrounded by an audience, hung over with chandeliers, like salons cleared of furniture. The dance borrowed all manner of postures from social etiquette, from fenc-



ing; the nature of the costumes prevented any extreme freedom in use of the body; the entire theatrical convention stiffened and amputated expression. These motives no longer exist, except in a few minds and ball-rooms, and should have brought about a comparable modification in dance technique. From the floor to the top of the head at the peak of a leap is all usable space for a dancer. He is surrounded by the entire framed air of the stage. We can expect of him that he shall, at some time, fill that space within his physical reach with his presence or design. There are, of course, all of those formalized dances, like strict counterpoint in music, which accept an unnatural limit for purposes of particular expression. But this limit *refers* to sacrificed space, it does not *ignore* it.

If Graham has overemphasized the use of the floor, and at times it has become a manner with her, it might at least awaken other choreographers to its possibilities. It can be argued that the modern school has done this, and to excess. But these are the costs of imitation rather than of influence. Young dancers, crawling around from corner to corner with fierce determination, have done about as much to implement this technique as have ice-skaters in using balletic figures. Doris Humphrey, who has used the lower stage areas in a very creative way upon occasion is, of course, an exception to this criticism.

Recently, Graham has been using another and more difficult area of stage-space, half-way between the floor and an upright position, about the level of a deep, second-position plié in ballet. This spring-like posture is variable, and can be moved into and away from, more quickly than the floor. Another expressive element in Graham's vocabulary is the fall from varying positions in different speeds and accents, for widely separate purposes of expression. It is a powerful, contracting movement: (the fall from the knees

across the front of the stage in a repeated arc in first solo, *Deaths and Entrances*; the circular drop in the final solos in *Letter to the World*.) All of these movements, because of their intensity and unfamiliarity, somehow suggest an extreme condition of feeling, and this is the way they are ordinarily used. The circular turns with leg extended in the 'Blue Sea' section of *Letter to the World*, are a variation of that astonishing extension more evident in *Frontier* or *Every Soul is a Circus*. Also typical of Graham's personal style is a beat of the body, from contraction to release, like the clutching and releasing pattern of the heart. Very marked, too, is the archaic turn of the hips toward the front of the stage, parallel to the feet, like women carrying vases on a Greek statue, as it is used in *Herodiade*.

When one says of Graham that she has been remarkably courageous, it is not just to indicate that she has had to face great adversity from her public or her critics, and the whole constellation of problems that surround and threaten innovation. These kinds of courage we expect of an artist, although not many artists exhibit them. (It is only the fantastic ingratitude of our society that it should resist and attempt to smother the artist whose work is their eventual heritage.) The kind of courage that is more rare in dancers is that toward strong, personal emotion in composition. Graham is not afraid of extreme emotional statement, and this gives her work a passion and humanity that is invaluable. She does not work with sentiment or the simulation of feeling, and the emotional states of being in her dances are not charted narratively, so that audiences must follow this journey on an unfamiliar ship. This is why I insist that Graham's dances are not intellectual or cold or autonomous or grotesque. They *are* unfamiliar, which seems hardly a criticism of a work of art.

Part of their unfamiliarity is their honesty, which, at this timid and ornamental moment in the history of dancing is a rare virtue. If her audiences are sometimes distraught at the imagery of *Dark Meadow*, it is because they are so ill-prepared to face the psychological reality which is the basis of her art. It is rather like lighting an enormous bonfire in the middle of an ice-house in which everyone is comfortably frozen. To their distress, the subject of Graham's dances is not dancing.

There is a reaction in certain quarters against Graham's art that is of a piece with the animosity that has recently grown up around figures as disparate as Joyce and Picasso. Leaving aside any deeper psychological implication in this battle against contemporaneity, it is at least typical of that nervous, vocal periphery which begins to want back what it imagines itself to have lost: grace and ease and charm, just a little shocking and off-center perhaps, but not this frenzy of inelegant feeling; something cold and perfect as a glass of water or a slice of Mondrian, but no more of this disturbing poetry cloaked in violence. Most of these objections, however, come from professionals, other dancers or artists who feel the validity of their own choice threatened, since I can only presume it takes an acrobatic intelligence to admire *Deaths and Entrances* and *Night Shadow* simultaneously. The secular audience has a more natural animosity as well as a more immediate vision, upon which an artist like Graham sooner or later comes to depend.

On the other hand, the danger, with a figure like Graham, is that she has attracted and perpetuated a legend, and her company and her school have not been the least to suffer from this sentimentality. The inroads that such a cult can make upon an artist's time, energy and creative honesty are enorm-

ous. And, additionally, they serve to alienate that potential part of Graham's audience which is irritated and antagonistic to such excessive, professional loyalty. This is as wasteful as it is unattractive, but it still functions at the intermissions of her concerts, and thickens the atmosphere of her studio. It can only burden her with distracting responsibilities, and surely she would be relieved, as any one who has had to face it would be, if it were to die its unnatural death. This problem is, of course, shared by many artists of her reputation, and only intensified for those whose work depends upon personal performance.

There is certainly no effort more significant in the development of the American theater than that of Martha Graham. The history of an undertaking which has gone from *Primitive Mysteries* and *Lamentation* to *Letter to the World*, *Deaths and Entrances* and *Dark Meadow* is more remarkable than our memory permits us to admit. For whatever brilliance and permanence these works have, or however short of any finality or perfection, their importance may be more extreme in another direction. Graham has anticipated and battled with a tremendous range of dance-theater problems in her generation. Her discoveries in this medium have influenced the dance with such remarkable thoroughness that she has been accused of imitating her imitators. At a further remove, this influence should have a more rewarding and subtle effect upon dancers. When the magnetism of her personal performance, and the battle for recognition are no longer the issue, it may be realized that the vocabulary of expressive movement owes more to her consistent courage and imagination than to any other dancer in our time.



Letter to the World.

Photograph, Barbara Morgan

RECENT WORKS BY MARTHA GRAHAM

PUNCH AND THE JUDY—Music, Robert McBride—Artistic collaboration—Arch Lauterer—Costumes—for women, Edythe Gilfond, for men, Charlotte Trowbridge. First presented at Bennington College, August 25, 1941.

DEATHS AND ENTRANCES—Music, Hunter Johnson—Set, Arch Lauterer—Costumes, Edythe Gilfond. First presented at Bennington College, July 18, 1943, (in practice clothes designed by Charlotte Trowbridge).

SALEM SHORE—Music, Paul Nordoff—Set, Arch Lauterer—Costume, Edythe Gilfond—Reader, Georgia Sargent. First presented at the Forty-sixth St. Theatre, New York City, December 26, 1943.

APPALACHIAN SPRING—Music, Aaron Copland—Set, Isamu Noguchi—Costumes, Edythe Gilfond. Commissioned by the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation. First presented at the Library of Congress, Washington, D. C., October 30, 1944.

HERODIADE—Music, Paul Hindemith—Set, Isamu Noguchi—Costumes, Edythe Gilfond. Commissioned by the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation. First presented at the Library of Congress, Washington, D. C., October 30, 1944. (Originally titled **Mirror Before Me.**)

IMAGINED WING—Music, Darius Milhaud—Set, Isamu Noguchi—Costumes, Edythe Gilfond. Commissioned by the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation. First presented at The Library of Congress, Washington, D. C., October 30, 1944. (As this was the only performance, and the work has not remained in the repertory, Mr. Horan has not discussed it here.)

DARK MEADOW—Music, Carlos Chavez—Set, Isamu Noguchi—Costumes, Edythe Gilfond. Commissioned by the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation. First presented at the Plymouth Theatre, New York City, January 23, 1946.

SERPENT HEART—Music, Samuel Barber—Set, Isamu Noguchi—Costumes, Edythe Gilfond. Commissioned by the Alice M. Ditson Fund of Columbia University. First presented at the McMillan Theatre, Columbia University, New York City, May 10, 1946. (Since its first performance **Serpent Heart** has been revised and re-titled **Cave of the Heart.**)

ERRAND INTO THE MAZE—Music, Gian-Carlo Menotti—Set and costumes, Isamu Noguchi. To be presented at the Ziegfeld Theatre, New York City, February 28, 1947.

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